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Home heating remains second highest cause of fire in the home

NFPA report shows 73% of home heating fire deaths attributed to space heaters

November 29, 2006 - As temperatures drop outdoors and people take steps to warm their homes, the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) urges the public to be mindful of the risks associated with home heating which is second only to cooking when it comes to causes of home fires. Along with the colder temperatures that accompany winter, there is an elevated risk of dying from fire during this season with December, January and February generally being the deadliest months for fires.

According to a newly released NFPA study, heating equipment was involved in an estimated 53,000 reported home structure fires in the United States in 2003. The study includes fires associated with chimneys and chimney connectors, space heaters, central heating, fireplaces, water heaters and heat tape. These fires accounted for 14% of all home fires and were responsible for an estimated 260 deaths, roughly 1,300 injuries and \$500 million in direct property damage.

Although space heaters, excluding fireplaces and chimneys, were responsible for one-fourth (26%) of home heating fires in 2003, they were the most deadly, accounting for three-fourths (73%) of the fire deaths related to home heating. Space heaters also were responsible for three out of every five injuries (58%) in home heating fires in 2003 and half (51%) of the associated property damage.

According to the report, space heaters present a greater fire risk than central heating systems. Space heaters tend to be closer to household combustibles and the people occupying the home, and they tend to require a more direct role by occupants in fueling, maintenance, and operation. Even so, any widely used heating device can be used safely, if the rules of safety are followed. NFPA suggests the following for safe heating:

- Maintain a 3 feet (or 1 meter) separation between things that can burn and heating equipment.
- When buying a new space heater, make sure it carries the mark of an independent testing laboratory and is legal for use in your community. (Some communities do not permit portable kerosene heaters, for example.)
- Install your stationary (fixed) space heater according to manufacturer's instructions or applicable codes or better yet, have it installed by a professional.
- Plug your electric-powered space heater into an outlet with sufficient capacity and never into an extension cord.
- Use the proper grade of the proper fuel for your liquid-fueled space heater, and never use gasoline in any heater not approved for gasoline use. Refuel only in a well-ventilated area and when the equipment is cool.
- In your fireplace or wood stove, use only dry, seasoned wood to avoid the build-up of creosote, an oily deposit that easily catches fire and accounts for most chimney fires and the largest share of home heating fires generally. Use only paper or kindling wood, not a flammable liquid, to start the fire. Do not use artificial logs in wood stoves.
- Make sure your fireplace has a sturdy screen to prevent sparks from flying into the room. Allow fireplace and woodstove ashes to cool before disposing in a metal container, which is kept a safe distance from your home.

- Turn off space heaters whenever the room they are in is unoccupied or under circumstances when manufacturer's instructions say they should be turned off. Portable space heaters are so easy to knock over in the dark that they should be turned off when you go to bed, but make sure your primary heating equipment for bedrooms is sufficient to avoid risks to residents from severe cold.
- Do not use your oven to heat your home.
- Make sure fuel-burning equipment is vented to the outside, that the venting is kept clear and unobstructed, and that the exit point is properly sealed around the vent, all of which is to make sure deadly carbon monoxide does not build up in the home.
- Inspect all heating equipment annually, and clean as necessary.
- Test smoke alarms monthly; install a carbon monoxide alarm in a central location outside each sleeping area.

NFPA has been a worldwide leader in providing fire, electrical, building, and life safety to the public since 1896. The mission of the international nonprofit organization is to reduce the worldwide burden of fire and other hazards on the quality of life by providing and advocating consensus codes and standards, research, training and education. Visit NFPA's Web site at www.nfpa.org.